

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

FROM: Head of Legal and Administrative Services

REPORT NUMBER **E56**

**TO: Overview & Scrutiny (Stewardship)
Committee**

DATE OF MEETING 5 July 2005

LAND CHARGES: PERFORMANCE, NLIS AND LAMP

1. **SUMMARY**

1.1 This report, which the Committee requested at its previous meeting, is for information only. It sets out Land Charges performance issues and steps necessary to move to electronic working at NLIS Level 3. It also summarises a proposal by MacDonald Dettwiler and Associates Ltd. (MDA) to undertake required data capture and conversion work to enable the transition to electronic working.

2. **RECOMMENDATION**

2.1 That the report be noted.

3. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

3.1 The cost of pursuing the Solution Definition offered by MDA would be £43,000.

4. **KEY INFORMATION**

4.1 **Recent performance trends.** The fluctuations in the performance of the Land Charges section are illustrated in Appendix A. Land Charges was an area of strong performance until July 2002 when new questions were added to the standard search form. Coupled with increased numbers of search inquiries, performance declined and was arrested through the temporary employment of a person to work an extra 15 hours per week. The intention was to retain this additional resource until March 2004 by which time computerisation was expected to have delivered some efficiency savings.

4.2 Savings have so far not been realised. Installation of the Land Charges software was part of a phased programme also involving an upgrade of the Planning system and the installation of a new Land and Property Terrier, all acquired as a package from the same supplier. The initial upgrade was delayed and this had a knock-on effect on the rest of the programme. The computerised Land Charges system finally went “live” in November 2003 but necessitated the diversion of resources for several weeks before that to set up the system. This inevitably had a detrimental effect on performance. The additional 15-hour resource, however, expired at the end of 2004.

4.3 Performance continued to suffer as problems arose with an associated data capture exercise. These were compounded by the failure to make significant progress with the Council’s Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG). Land Charges registrations and the booking-in of searches became more complicated procedures as a result of computerisation and any benefits of electronically processing search replies could not offset this as well as the loss of the temporary extra resource.

- 4.4 *Ad hoc* improvements to processes were made as staff became more proficient with electronic working. However, one of the most time-consuming steps in processing a search and, therefore, a major limiting factor as regards improving the section's performance, was the requirement to double-check information supplied by other departments against paper records. Traditionally, this was always carried out within the Land Charges section and was necessary to safeguard the Council's legal position but, because of the other factors mentioned above, this was now an impediment to progress. From January 2004, therefore, Planning Control staff began to double-check their own responses, but this attempt to reduce the overall backlog eventually created a backlog in the Planning Division. Thereafter, the number of searches outstanding at any point in the process has been closely monitored to ensure that available resources are applied to the area of greatest need, but it was only when the opportunity arose between May 2004 and December 2004 for an officer to be seconded full-time to the Land Charges section that the overall backlog could start to be cleared and performance could steadily return to more acceptable levels.
- 4.5 It has not been possible to sustain this improvement and steps are once more being taken temporarily to supplement resources within the section.
- 4.6 Although performance has not so far improved as a result of computerisation, the moves towards electronic working have considerably added to the security of the data from fire, loss and flood and have contributed to an ongoing reduction in the amount of paper copies and storage space. In addition, for records where both the planning history and Land Charges Register information are complete, a search may be processed rapidly and this is the goal of operating at NLIS Level 3. The ongoing data capture exercise has also represented a thorough audit of entries on the Land Charges Register and has increased confidence in their accuracy.
- 4.7 **NLIS level 3.** The National Land Information Service (NLIS) is an e-government initiative designed to expedite conveyancing through the electronic submission of search inquiries and replies. It requires a functional gazetteer linked to the National Land and Property Gazetteer and a computerised Land Charges system. At its optimum, a search request could be downloaded from a website directly into the Land Charges system and, if the necessary data in all departments has been captured and/or converted and linked, it would be possible to process and reply to a search electronically and regularly achieve turnaround times of 2-3 days.
- 4.8 **Local Authority Modernisation Programme (LAMP) proposal.** Babergh is not currently in a position to progress to NLIS Level 3. The Council has so far invested approximately £154,000 on software and data capture work for Land Charges and the Council's LLPG. This has not been abortive but much work remains to be done including:-
- cleansing the LLPG
 - completing the electronic capture of the contents of the Land Charges Register, which itself has been hampered by the lack of a fully functional LLPG
 - undertaking significant data capture/conversion/integration of data held in other departments.
- 4.10 In order to assist Councils to connect at Level 3, NLIS established a supporting programme, known as LAMP. NLIS chose MDA to provide a managed service for local authorities seeking to connect. MDA offers a free consultancy and presentation and, subsequently, for a fee, will advise in detail on the scope of work needed. If required, MDA would also manage any subsequent work. Upon completion, the Council would have to pay MDA an agreed monthly fee over a number of years.

- 4.11 MDA has reported on the results of its investigation into the current position at Babergh. It recognises the significant high-level commitment to change and modernisation within the authority but points out that service transformation plans are constrained by resource availability and funding and that the will to move forward is hindered by the absence of integrated land and property information. The report states that “the key challenges facing Babergh are those of integrating multiple disparate systems together with data capture, data conversion and validation”. Currently, the report indicates, “there is repetition of tasks both within and across departments and considerable time is expended responding to search requests.” MDA has also indicated that, as part of the required infrastructure, the Council needs a fully functional, spatially enabled LLPG integrated with other data, applications and systems. MDA endorses the appointment of an official LLPG Custodian and the establishment of a separate property unit, recommendations that were included in an internal report earlier this year and are under consideration as to the best means of achieving a structure that would ensure the co-ordination of all property-related information and drive a strategy for its integration. MDA’s findings are that the Local Land Charges service’s goals (to achieve NLIS level 3 status and reduce search times) cannot be achieved at present because of the lack of trusted and integrated data, repetitious checking and the reliance on partially manual processes. MDA can assist with data conversion and integration, the completion and spatial enablement of the LLPG and with the provision of a new or upgraded Land Charges system to include spatial elements. It proposes a seven year managed service to ensure ongoing maintenance of new systems.
- 4.12 If the Council wishes to proceed further, the next stage of MDA’s investigation is the Solution Definition Phase carried out within a period of 21 weeks for a fee of £43,000. In this phase MDA would work with the Council to define, in detail, a solution to address the Council’s needs and a plan to implement that solution. It would include the following items:-
- Identify any process deficiencies
 - Recommend outline improvements
 - Review and detail solution requirements including data conversion needs and an upgrade or replacement plan for the Land Charges application
 - Detailed system design
 - Identify any hardware and infrastructure requirements
 - Specify interfaces between internal and external systems
 - Select suppliers for data conversion work
 - Prepare an implementation plan
- 4.14 At the end of this phase, MDA would commit to a final price proposal and the Council would be able to assess whether to enter into a further agreement for the full managed service (currently estimated to cost between £630,000 and £650,000), or choose certain elements of the work that it considers a priority. How to fund all or any of the works would require careful consideration.
- 4.15 The Council would also be expected to provide office space for MDA and its contractors undertaking the work. It would also have to allow for temporary staff (24 staff-months) to deal with data preparation and validation as these key elements of work require local knowledge to resolve.

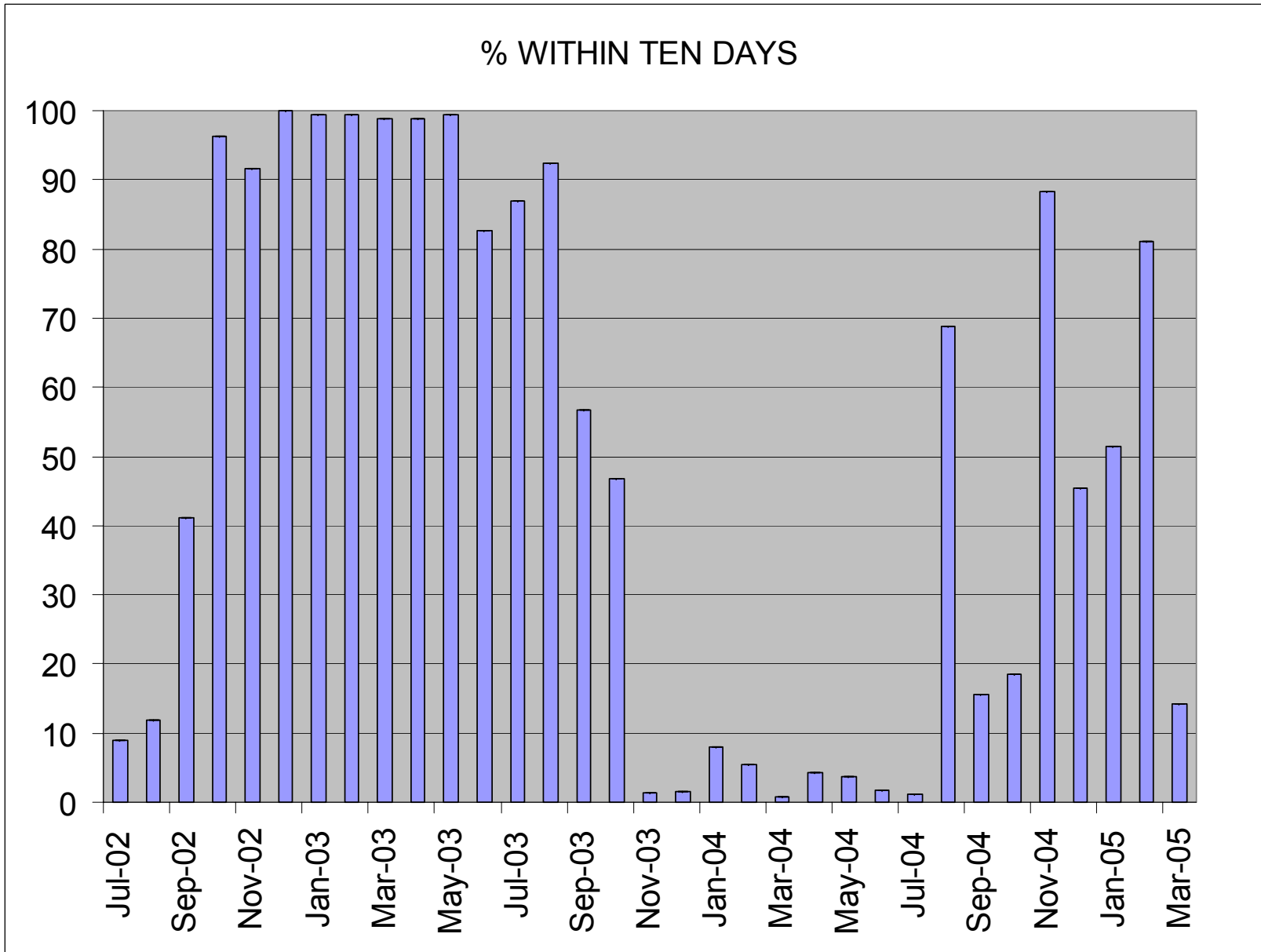
- 4.16 It is important to the improvement plan for Land Charges that full NLIS level 3 connectivity be achieved. At the same time, it would assist in achieving one of the Council's e-government targets. In order to realise these benefits, however, it is not sufficient simply to acquire the necessary software – the Council must have a fully functioning LLPG and all the data used in processing search replies must be trustworthy and compatible with the Land Charges system. To reach that point will require considerable investment by the Council. Officers are preparing a detailed report to the Corporate Management Team in response to MDA's Feasibility Study. This report will consider a range of issues such as how the proposal fits in with the Council's overall objectives as well as the total cost of the proposal, including the internal resources needed for project management and data validation.

5 APPENDICES AND BACKGROUND PAPERS REFERRED TO:

- (a) Appendix A – Land Charges Performance Indicators, July 2002 – May 2005 (attached)

CONTACT: Ray Amesbury

DIRECT LINE: 01473 825891



STANDARD SEARCHES

